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SUBJECT:PRT/MAZAR-E SHARIF - PROVINCIAL COUNCIL MUCH
IMPROVED

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11. Summary: The Balkh Provincial Council has made great strides since January. Although still lacking a clear mandate from the central government, it is developing a role for itself in provincial governance. Challenges still remain as the Council struggles to define itself to the people by whom it was elected. End Summary.

Background

12. When PRToff met on January 31 with Farhad Azimi, Chairman of the Balkh Provincial Council, the results were frustrating. Azimi complained repeatedly about a lack of "financial and logistical support," citing a shortage of cars (the council has two) as the chief reason he and his council were unable to perform any work. Another concern was the continued delay in receiving a legislated mandate for the council, without which the relationship between the council and the governor was complicated and unclear. According to Mr. Azimi, until Kabul clearly defined the role of the council in the province, it was simply a group of men and women who sat in their office and turned away requests from the people of Balkh.

Recent Improvements

¶3. In a discussion with PRToff March 25, Azimi indicated things had changed since January, and a combination of training and time has resulted in the council's increasing activism in the province. The council held an open meeting at the Governor's offices in Mazar-e Sharif on March 20 to which residents of all ten districts in the city were invited. At the meeting, they explained to their constituents the purpose of the Provincial Council and asked all present to submit their grievances so that the council could work toward addressing them. Using the people's complaints as both agenda and benchmark, the council developed a three-month strategic plan with the assistance of USAID-trained Provincial Council mentors. They plan to meet with Governor Atta in early April to present their plan in hopes of securing his cooperation in their objectives.

Role of the Provincial Council

¶4. At present, the Provincial Council's primary service is negotiating area land disputes. The large number of returnees and poor or nonexistent recordkeeping have made land-related problems an ongoing concern for the region. The council members began handling these disputes shortly after being elected when the people of Balkh began approaching them with such problems, seeking a solution from a legitimate elected body. Since then, the council has leveraged both its legitimacy as an electoral body and its ethnic diversity to bring many complaints to resolution. One recent example involved a landlord who had let a shopkeeper operate on some of his property in his absence. The landlord returned to

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evict the shopkeeper, since he planned to redevelop the land in the near future. The shopkeeper brought his complaint to the council, which ultimately decided in favor of the landlord as he owned the property outright. At the same time, however, they convinced the landlord to give the shopkeeper a small sum of money from which he could lease a shop space elsewhere in the city. Azimi told PRToff the landlord complied with this request because he considered it to be reasonable, neutral, and carrying with it the authority of a body he himself took part in electing.

¶5. Another niche the council has found for itself is in the review of provincial regulations, procedures and activities. As Azimi said, "We have no authority, but as representatives of the citizens of this country we have the right to review procedures and question them. We have no power of appointment, but we can ask the police why they are not taking more action in certain areas." According to Azimi, Gov. Atta is optimistic about this process and views it as a means to improve communication between the governor and the people. Unfortunately, as Azimi also pointed out, the council is housed in a rented space at the pleasure of the governor, and until the members are able to find an office independent of the governor they must be careful not to anger him and risk eviction.

¶6. Another component of the council's growth has been the exchange of ideas and experiences with neighboring councils. On a semi-regular basis, the councils meet in a central location to discuss progress and areas in need of improvement. This system, which has developed naturally with some urging from the PRT, has ensured a continuous organic growth shared by all regional councils,

rather than uneven development driven by individual experience.

¶7. In an effort to better define itself, the council has developed a Power Point presentation for both internal and external consumption. The presentation includes procedures and rules for meetings ("No mobile phones," "No insults," "No bringing of private problems to the table," etc.) as well as a structural breakdown of the committee's organization, subcommittee membership, areas of responsibility, and mandate. The presentation, while erring on the side of thoroughness, shows the effort the council has made to determine its direction and its goals and how best to achieve them.

Some Problems Remain

¶8. Despite all the improvements, the Provincial Council still faces some difficulties. Azimi is growing irritated at the lack of coordination between the council and the NGO community in Balkh Province. He claims they do not consult with the council at all, choosing rather to execute their activities with the local ministerial representatives or, worse, on their own. PRToff has

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arranged some meetings between Azimi, UNAMA and ACBAR in hopes of moving this issue towards a solution.

¶9. A second problem involves perceived international and UN interference in council affairs. During the meeting between Azimi and PRToff on January 31, a Finnish Development Advisor was present. Wanting to build on an idea developed by a previous State PRToff, the advisor approached Azimi about distributing leaflets to Balkh residents explaining what the Provincial Council does, who the members are, and how to reach them. Azimi warmed to this idea, requesting that it be developed in consultation with the council. Unfortunately, the advisor released the leaflet, which contained the line, "Although the Provincial Council can advise the governor, he does not need to listen to what they say," on her own. Although the statement was technically true, Azimi rightfully pointed out it made the council look weak and passive, and suggested the idea could have been conveyed differently. He believes as things stand now, an image of an ultimately ineffectual council is being propagated. The leaflet has been cancelled and a new version is being developed.

¶10. Azimi also referenced a recent poll issued by the UN. A questionnaire developed by UNAMA was distributed across the province asking fairly pointed questions about the council's track record and efficacy. Azimi said he believed this move to be premature, especially as regards the more remote districts which are still inaccessible. The council has been elected for six months and been an active body for, at best, two -- the UNAMA assessment seems to be getting ahead of itself, presumably to meet internationally-imposed reporting guidelines.

¶11. In the meeting with PRToff, Azimi again requested "logistical and financial support". According to Azimi the Council has only two vehicles, making trips out to the districts quite difficult. If one group goes out, all the other members are unable to leave their headquarters in Mazar-e Sharif, he said.

Comment

¶12. The Council has made great headway in the last three months. The USAID mentors seem to be serving an active role in the Council's development while it makes inroads establishing a relationship with the provincial government. The Council still lacks sufficient resources and housing, but these problems are peripheral to the critical need for further development of council capacity and mandate. Azimi, who initially came across as a weak chairman with no plans, vision or initiative, now seems to have rolled up his sleeves and become very involved in the nuts and bolts of developing a new representative body for the province. If the current momentum continues to develop, this council ultimately will serve as an effective bridge between the provincial population and its appointed

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government.

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